

Once upon a time in a strange world far away there lived beings of great wisdom and virtue. They lived in a huge castle on the shore of a sea of sand and above them three suns burnt bright in the heavens. Their land was one of beauty and goodness, until an evil race of lizard-like creatures known as the Skeksis occupied the castle and claimed the all-powerful crystal which was kept there, using its arcane influence to corrupt and enslave.

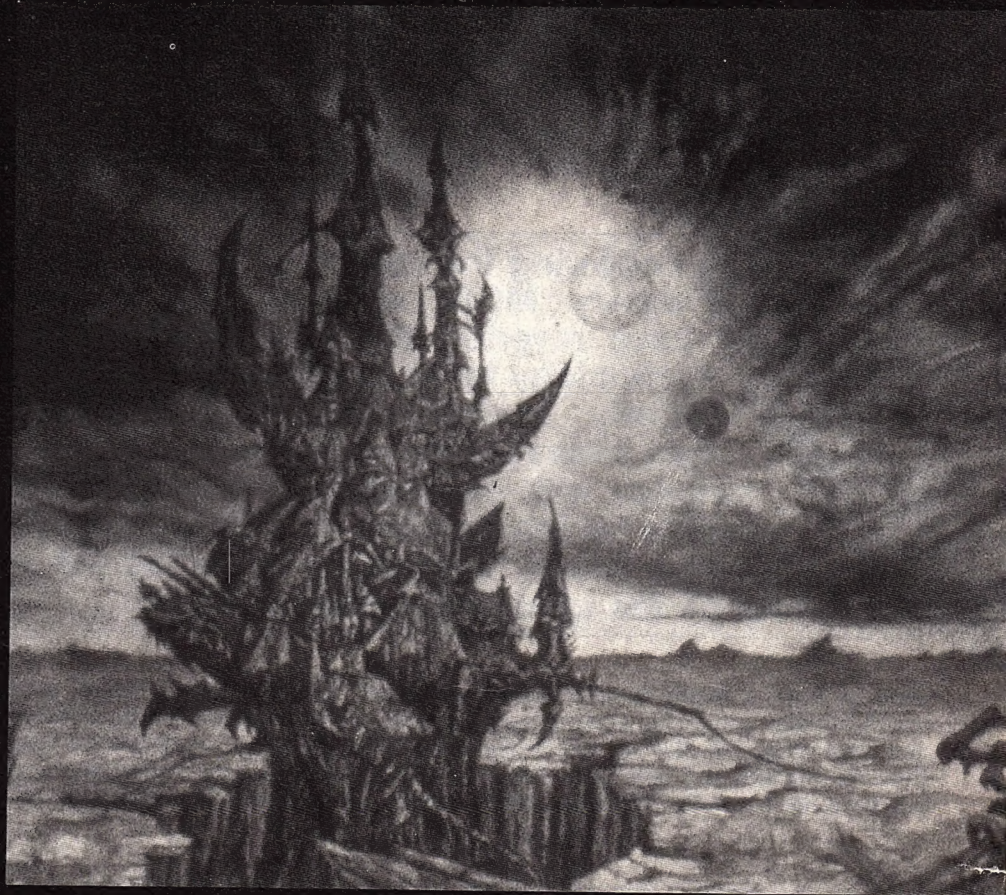
The wicked reptiles were frightened only of an ancient prophecy which decreed that small innocent creatures known as Gelflings would finally be the cause of their downfall, and to prevent this ever coming true they set out to destroy the entire Gelfling race...

When master puppeteer Jim Henson first devised the idea behind *The Dark Crystal* he was riding high on the crest of a Muppet wave. The Muppets made their debut in a little-seen television show called *Sam and Friends* back in 1954, and progressed through appearances on *The Jimmy Dean Show*, *Sesame Street* and *Saturday Night Live* to their own, award-winning, *Muppet Show*, featuring the weekly adventures of Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear and company.

In 1975 the series had an estimated 250 million viewers in over 100 countries. But Henson was not fully satisfied that he had achieved enough with his creations. For *Saturday Night Live*, a late-night American humour show, he had created the Land of Gorch and its bizarre inhabitants — a strange world full of grotesque puppet creatures amid a barren landscape of smouldering volcanoes against which almost surrealistic sketches were played out. The success of these sequences inspired Henson to look around for a project which would take puppetry away from gross humour and caricature into the realms of serious drama.

THE MAKING OF

Allan Bryce investigates the genesis of *The Dark Crystal*, the most ambitious puppet fantasy ever made, now out on video from RCA/Columbia. . .




The castle of the Dark Crystal



*Poog — friend of Jen and Kira, the two sweet Gelflings in *The Dark Crystal**

He was struck by an illustration in a book based on Lewis Carroll's poem, *The Pig-Tale*, which showed crocodiles washing themselves in preparation for a dinner party. The image stayed with him and became the inspiration for one of the *Dark Crystal*'s most memorable scenes: in which the vile, lizard/vulture-like Skeksis indulge in a disgusting feast. But in 1975 when Henson first came up with the idea of his puppet epic, called tentatively *The Crystal*, he had no script or financial backing. Despite the fact that the Muppets had earned him fame and relative fortune he could little afford to fund the project himself. He approached Lord Lew Grade and his ACC film and television production empire with the idea, and was given a cautious go-ahead, provided that he would continue making *The Muppet Show* for them, and would also agree to make a movie based on the series before embarking on production of *The Crystal*.

While working on *The Muppet Movie*



Following the launch of their revolutionary "MOS" video camera, Hitachi have reverted to conventional tube technology for their latest camera, the slightly cheaper VK-C870E. Richard Dean assesses its performance in conjunction with the smart, up-market VT-7E portable (which doubles as a fully integrated home video system) and comes out in favour of the tried-and-trusted Saticon.

Outdoor filter; a White Balance system which prompts you at the start of each new recording, provides its own white filter for the lens and tells you when it has been set correctly. There is colour

reversal for transferring colour print negatives; iris boost and cut for spotlight and backlit shots; a two-speed 6:1 zoom toggle switch below the start/stop trigger on the handgrip stem; auto-fade; a power-

saving Standby mode; Macro for close-range work like text and illustrations; and a switchable auto-focus. The viewfinder is reversible for the left or right eye and supports a comprehensive range of warning messages, all in English.

Fade operates once only in conjunction with the start/stop trigger, which is more sensible than the autonomous type you find on some other cameras, and the iris automatically closes when power is switched off. This is an excellent safety feature to protect the sensitive (10 lux) Saticon tube.

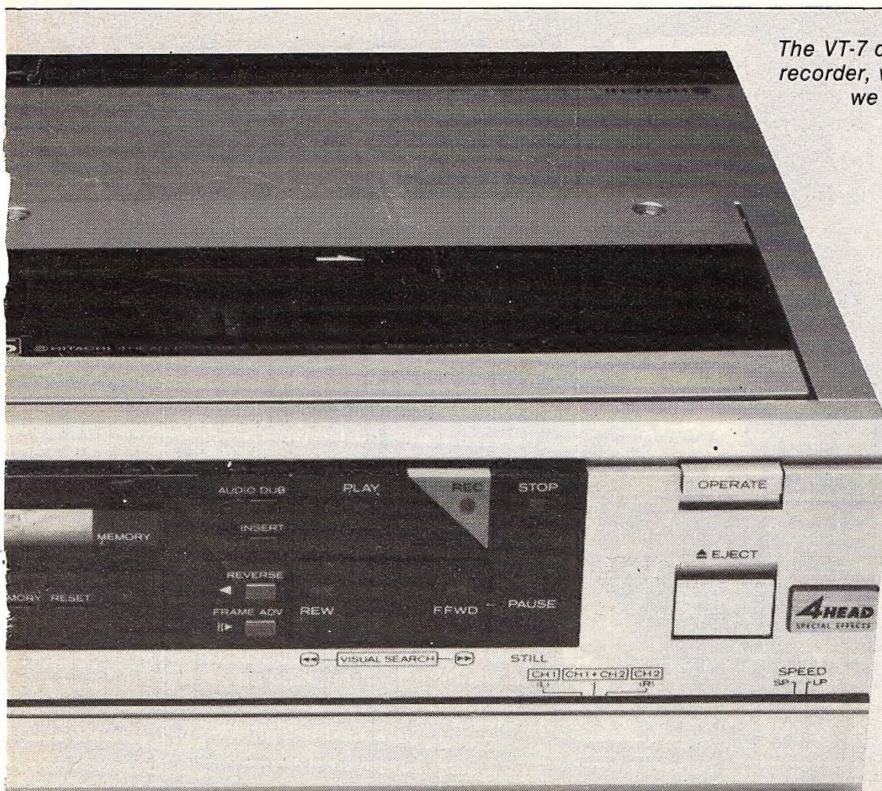
Manageable

The camera's 2.6 kg weight plus 3.6 kg for the portable seemed quite manageable, thanks in part to the grip which uses a support band across the back of the hand on an adjustable stem. Both the two-speed zoom control and Start/Stop trigger are operated by right hand fingers on the stem — I would have preferred thumb operation for the button and a broad rocker for zoom as favoured by JVC on their excellent Compact GZ-S3 ½ in Saticon camera. Nevertheless, the left hand is free to operate focussing or the host of neatly arranged special functions like Fade and Tiling.

I preferred this camera in all aspects to the Hitachi VK-C2000E MOS we reviewed recently, despite the high-tech of its Metal Oxide Semiconductor pick-up device. As we said at the time, a ½ in diameter pick-up makes a much more compact design possible than the ¾ in MOS (the smallest yet), added to which Saticon tubes are sensitive and produce high quality pictures. The VK-C2000E also costs about £120 more than the VK-C870E.

Together, the £840 VT-7E and £640 VK-C870E camera make a good creative combination at reasonable prices — and you may be able to undercut those quoted. But the real benefit is that you can buy the recorder first as a luxury mains recorder, safe in the knowledge that movie-making is just one elegant step away. Highly recommended equipment.

The VT-7 component recorder, with which we tested the camera



The Dark Crystal

Skeksis who are out to destroy them. The main interest in the film comes from observing the many wonders of its Tolkienesque universe, including an assortment of the strangest looking creatures imaginable. There are the fierce Garthim, crab-like assassins despatched by the Skeksis to destroy Gelflings; the Landstriders, eight-foot tall, stilt-legged beings who negotiate the grotesque terrain at frightening speed; and the mystical guardians of *The Dark Crystal*, the benevolent UrRu, whose kind and gentle demeanour is certainly not mirrored in their appearance — they are squat, slow-moving creatures with four arms, and faces expressively lined with loops and whorls of flesh.

Henson wanted his strange world to be well stocked with grotesque beings, but the main focus of the narrative is on the Gelflings, the most recognisably human of all the characters. Henson brought in ace makeup technician Dick Smith to help achieve a realistic look. He also adopted the use of taxidermist's eyes as opposed to the cartoon-like Muppet variety because this gave the characters a look of actually being alive. This realism extended to the use of foam latex in sculpting each character, something that had never been done before — all of Henson's Muppets had been conventional puppets carved out of foam and covered in fabric.

Henson's techniques for animating his characters were similarly ambitious: multiple cable mechanisms were rigged up so that some of the larger creatures could enjoy a greater degree of sophisticated movement. In one case there were 21 cables used to manipulate separate facets of a character's movements while a man inside made the head and mouth move. In the scenes where the Skeksis are seen to walk about, it was decided to use midgets to make the movement as realistic as possible.

(1976), Henson began to plan out his epic in his spare time. More important than the storyline would be the actual look of the film and he settled upon Brian Froud, a young British artist and sculptor who had won great acclaim for his illustrated book, *Faeries*, to design the visual style of *The Dark Crystal*. Froud's work was after the fashion of the great Victorian fairytale illustrator Arthur Rackham and had just the right sort of atmosphere for Henson's movie.

Froud became the architect behind the universe of the *Dark Crystal*, and for the next three years he laboured, along with a vast army of personnel, to design both the wierd landscape and the odd creatures who inhabited it. And as the creatures evolved, so did the story.

The plot was devised by Jim Henson and fleshed out by David Odell, author of *The Muppet Movie*. It was fairly simple, and concerned the battle between good and evil as personified respectively in the elf-like innocence of the Gelfling hero and heroine, Kira and Jan, and the repugnant



The dying master

The cost of making the film was astronomical compared to most movies where special effects comprise only a small part of the action and are usually shot by small second units while actors and crew get on with the main bulk of filming. *The Dark Crystal* was all special effects, and came out costing some twenty six million dollars!

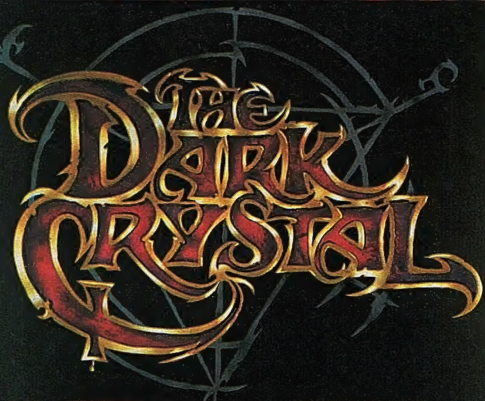
More than the expense, though, Henson and crew were worried about



Aughra, Keeper of Secrets

whether audiences would accept puppets in a serious film. Fortunately they were given a chance to find out in advance when producer Gary Kurtz approached them for help designing the character of Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Henson constructed Yoda with a skin made of foam latex and realistic-looking taxidermist's eyes, giving the character a startling authenticity, and its voice was provided by Frank Oz, better known as Miss Piggy and Fozzie Bear! The results were so successful that Henson and crew knew they were on the right track with

THE MAKING OF



The villainous Skeksis hold a ceremony of power in the Crystal Chamber

The Dark Crystal.

Being a perfectionist, Henson rigged up an elaborate video system to make sure that he was getting the best possible results at all times. He had each of his puppet operators wear a three inch camera monitor strapped around their necks that relayed a picture of what was being filmed so that they could judge their character's performance im-

mediately. Also there were problems ensuring that the puppet manipulators were not seen in any of the camera shots — not an easy task when you consider that most of the characters existed only from the waist up, and the studio floor was always packed to overflowing with technicians.

Henson's final achievement is a labour of love that represents seven years hard

work and takes puppetry into a new dimension. Whether it is to your taste or not, few would argue that *The Dark Crystal* represents an entirely new kind of cinematic experience. It's always a visual delight and evokes a sense of wonder in the way that few modern movies do. Perhaps Jim Henson will turn out to be the new Walt Disney in this field. It would be a pity if we had to wait another seven years to find out. □